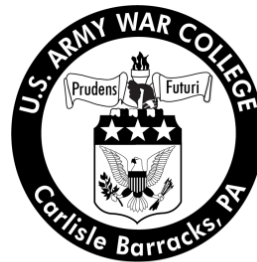


# Strategy Research Project

## Toward a Theory of Strategic Communication: A Relationship Management Approach

by

Lieutenant Colonel Cheryl D. Phillips  
United States Army Reserve



United States Army War College  
Class of 2012

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**TOWARD A THEORY OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION:  
A RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT APPROACH**

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Lieutenant Colonel Cheryl D. Phillips  
United States Army Reserve

Dr. Mark A. Van Dyke  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## **ABSTRACT**

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This paper contributes to the strategic communication practice by providing a theory-based alternative to the message influence model that improves the U.S. government's ability to meet its objectives. Achieving this purpose also contributes to scholarship by extending relational theory to the study of information as an element of national power. This paper explores the use of the relational theory as a framework for strategic communication practice. Relational theory espouses the importance of mutually beneficial organization-publics relationships. Hence, a relational theory framework for strategic communication fills gaps and builds a bridge between current practice and theory.





## TOWARD A THEORY OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: A RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT APPROACH

For years, the debate surrounding the practice of strategic communication centered on how it could help senior leaders achieve their objectives. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, U.S. Navy (Ret.), believed that strategic communication was a process, not a set of capabilities. Other leaders have expressed perspectives that focused on the importance of the right message, at the right time, through the right channel. Often, these perspectives centered on the point of view of a sender, who transmitted a message to a receiver, who interpreted the message, and was then influenced.

Strategic communicators believed in this formulaic approach. They reasoned that successful communication entailed crafting a message that resonated with the intended audience, sending it via a medium relevant to the audience, with intended effect, and at the optimum time. Following this formula, communicators expected that the intended audience would receive the message, understand it as intended, and adopt desired attitudes and behaviors according to the desired effect. This approach is called the *message influence model* because messages are seen as vehicles that carry information from a source to a receiver. “The purpose of the message is to influence the receiver to understand the information in the same way as the source, if not persuade him or her to change attitudes or act in a particular way.”<sup>1</sup>

For more than a decade, the U.S. military has applied the message influence model to its multiple communication campaigns in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the U.S. military has been unable to obtain the support of key publics to achieve U.S.

government objectives using this approach because the message influence model has failed. The United States seemed surprised at Afghan citizens' response to Qur'an burnings and alleged civilian murders by a U.S. service member in early 2012. A U.S. adviser at the NATO headquarters in Kabul noted the inability to predict Afghans' reactions illustrates how little the United States knows about Afghanistan after a decade of war.<sup>2</sup> This paper will demonstrate the need for a new strategic communication approach based on human communication theory.

The relational theory of human communication provides a useful intellectual framework for strategic communication practice. Relational theory espouses the importance of developing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and key publics. Both the organization and publics influence the other, and communication activities link the parties.

This paper contributes to the strategic communication body of knowledge and advances the notion that theory should form the foundation for its effective practice. First, a review and synthesis of scholarly literature identifies the contributions of research and publications to human communication, relational theory, and strategic communication. Second, the literature review demonstrates how the relational theory applies to strategic communication practice. Third, this paper shows how current relationship building efforts fall short, revealing gaps between current strategic communication practice and relational theory. Fourth, the application of theory to practice suggests that a relationship management approach to strategic communication is more effective than a message influence-based approach. Finally, it provides

recommendations for the future practice of strategic communication, applying relational theory.

### Human Communication

Like many complex human activities, *communication* is abstract, multi-dimensional, and difficult to define. Scholars from a variety of disciplines look at communication through diverse lenses to discover a comprehensive working definition of communication that encompasses its intricacies. How these academicians define communication, in turn, points them to different theories, models, and approaches.

Many scholars think about communication as a process. Shannon and Weaver defined communication as "as process in which one mind uses messages to affect another mind."<sup>3</sup> They thought of communication as analogous to a telephone system with five parts: (1) an *information source* that created a message to be communicated to the receiver; (2) a *transmitter* that encoded the message into a signal that is transmitted over a channel; (3) the *channel*, or the medium that carried the signal from transmitter to receiver and that may be degraded by noise; (4) the *receiver* that decoded the message from the signal; and (5) the *destination*, which is the person for whom the message is intended.<sup>4</sup>

*Linear Approach.* Other scholars think about communication's ability to affect. Berlo believed that the basic purpose of communication "is to become an affecting agent, to affect others, our physical environment, and ourselves, to become a determining agent, to have a vote in how things are. In short, we communicate to influence, to affect with intent."<sup>5</sup> In 1960, Berlo applied the Shannon-Weaver model to human communication, beginning with a *source* that has "ideas, needs, intentions, information, and a purpose for communicating"<sup>6</sup> that are formulated into a *message* that

is translated into symbols by an *encoder* that uses the skills of the communicator. The encoded message is sent via a *channel* to the *receiver*, who *decodes* or retranslates the symbols into a usable form.<sup>7</sup> This linear approach is called the *message influence model* because messages are seen as “as a vehicle for carrying information from a source to a receiver. The purpose of the message is to influence the receiver to understand the information in the same way as the source, if not to persuade the receiver to change attitudes or act in a particular way.”<sup>8</sup>

For Berlo, *fidelity* determined the effect of the message. Fidelity explains the source’s effectiveness in achieving some purpose. As long as fidelity is maintained, and noise does not degrade the message, the message will reach the destination exactly as intended by the source. The lack of communicator skill may distort a message at the encoding or decoding stages. “Distortion occurs because communicators lack sufficient skills to faithfully translate the information to or from symbols, or their culture or individual attitudes corrupt the translation process in some way.”<sup>9</sup>

Influence-seeking sources promote fidelity in their transmissions through simple, concise messages that are easier to encode and decode. Messages can be repeated to ensure that unskilled receivers “get it right.” The sender can also try to understand the receiver’s culture or attitudes, and then deftly encode messages that are least likely to be distorted.<sup>10</sup>

According to Rossiter and Pearce, the linear message influence approach to communication “assumes that the effects of a message are attributable to the content of a message, thus allowing a competent communication analyst to predict the

persuasiveness of clarity of messages based on an analysis of message content.”<sup>11</sup>

Research has shown, however, that such predictions are not very accurate.

The emphasis on the immediate effects of the message also limits the linear approach to communication. Those subscribing to the linear approach assume that the immediate effects are enduring and that only the recipient is affected by the communication.<sup>12</sup> This is not the case in all communicative events.

*Interaction Approach.* The interaction approach to the study of the communication process is more advanced than the linear view, albeit still limited. The linear model emphasizes the one-way activity of Person A saying B to Person C with effect D. The interaction perspective points out through a two-way approach that thereafter Person C may respond with message E to Person A with effect F.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of a circle describes the interaction view which recognizes that Person A and Person B respond reciprocally to one another. Key concepts are feedback and mutual effects.<sup>14</sup>

The interaction approach acknowledges that both parties affect the other, and adds together the basic units of interaction viewed in the linear model. Rossiter and Pearce state that “the interaction approach is a bit more sophisticated in that it acknowledges that in most communication situations we are rarely only sources or only recipients of messages.”<sup>15</sup>

*Transactional and Transactive Approaches.* Psychologist Berne is credited with the theory of transactional analysis developed in the 1950s, which is a model of communication, a theory of personality, and a study of repetitive patterns of behavior. For Berne, interpersonal communication was at the center of social relationships and

psychoanalysis. He began with the notion that when two people encounter each other, one will speak to the other, termed the transaction stimulus. He called the reaction from the other person the transaction response. The person sending the stimulus is the agent; the person who responds is the respondent. Transactional analysis became the method of examining the transaction: "I do something to you, and you do something back."<sup>16</sup> Berne's theory influenced the interpersonal communication field of study.

The transactive approach to the study of communication does a better job than the linear or interactive models of considering the nature of communication as a process.<sup>17</sup> According to Tucker, Weaver, and Berryman-Fink, "A process is a continuous interaction of a large number of factors, with each factor affecting every other factor, all at the same time. A process approach views events and relationships as dynamic, ongoing, ever-changing, and continuous."<sup>18</sup>

Rossiter and Pearce were concerned with communication behavior and assumed the way people communicate significantly affects the communication processes that develop. Generally, communication consists of behaviors for coping with messages: making meanings from messages, and making messages from meanings. "Meaning is the significance which the communicator assigns to the objects, persons and events in his environment."<sup>19</sup> In other words, things are what they *mean* to persons. Things have different meanings for different people. Additionally, meanings are in people and not in messages.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than focusing on sending messages that attempt to influence, the transactive approach sees communication as an attempt to achieve meaning. The approach views all participants as active communicators in the sense-making process.

The nature of this communication process sees communicative transactions as having a past, present, and future.<sup>21</sup>

The transactive approach is concerned with more than how Person A's message affects Person B. Instead, it becomes more beneficial to ask how Person A's and Person B's messages affect the other, and how those messages characterize the relationship between the parties. According to Tucker, Weaver, and Berryman-Fink, "The transactional approach involves impact or influence, with all parties simultaneously influencing all other parties. [It] emphasizes the reciprocal, mutually dependent nature of communication."<sup>22</sup>

This more holistic view considers the strategic or psychological, and tactical or mechanical complexity of communication, and it recognizes that all parties are at the same time generating and perceiving multiple messages with numerous influences on all involved. The transactive approach places more emphasis on the relationship of the parties.

From the interpersonal communication field of study, Barnlund in 1970 first proposed the transactional model of communication. Barnlund believed that in the transactional model, interpersonal communication was a dynamic process in which the two participants are simultaneously sending and receiving messages.<sup>23</sup>

The transactional model of communication views communication as an intricate process that evolves from participants joining into a relationship that is more than the sum of its parts. Communication is much more than a conveyor belt on which messages are sent back and forth, arriving at the other end in the same form as the message was sent. According to Thomlison, "As human beings, we have an extraordinary repertoire of

communication skills centering around our unique capacity to engage in the mutual creation of meaning when we communicate with another person.”<sup>24</sup>

### Strategic Communication

The notion that *strategic communication* is essential to achieving organizational goals is prevalent in contemporary practice. However, no one has proposed an adequate definition that addresses communication from the perspectives of all parties, the effects of their simultaneous interactions, and their mutually desired outcomes.

Lack of a universal definition of strategic communication has led to confusion and misuse of an important instrument of national power. The Barack Obama administration referred to strategic communication in the "National Framework for Strategic Communication" as

the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals.<sup>25</sup>

The message influence model is at the root of the Obama administration's approach to strategic communication. This narrow view of communication is linear and considers the interaction only from the perspective of the communicator whose words and deeds affect a select audience. While the definition recognizes that audience perceptions are important, it does not explain how communicators come to know and understand the audience.

The Department of Defense's (DoD) notion of strategic communication is more expansive than that of the Obama administration. The DoD defined strategic communication as



focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.<sup>26</sup>

The DoD takes a transactional view of communication, intentionally seeking to understand and engage key audiences. However, the communicative act still focuses on the message source who desires to advance U.S. government interests, policies, and objectives. Additionally, the definition does not explain how to develop understanding between the organization and the audiences.

The 2004 "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication" defined strategic communication in broadest terms:

Strategic communication is vital to America's national security and foreign policy...it describes a variety of instruments used by governments for generations to *understand* global attitudes and cultures, *engage* in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions, *advise* policy makers, diplomats, and military leaders on the public opinion implications of policy choices, and *influence* attitudes and behavior through communication strategies" (italics in original).<sup>27</sup>

The Defense Science Board (DSB) went on to say that strategic communication can "help to shape context and build relationships that enhance the achievement of political, economic, and military objectives. It can be used to mobilize publics in support of major policy initiatives – and to support objectives before, during, and after a conflict."<sup>28</sup> Further, strategic communication "will engage in a respectful dialogue that begins with listening and assumes decades of sustained effort."<sup>29</sup>

By taking a transactional approach to strategic communication, the DSB considers the process from the perspective of both the message source and receiver.

This view promotes the importance of actively building relationships through dialogue with key publics.

The DoD and DSB definitions of strategic communication share a number of commonalities: (1) a sender who communicates a message with the intention of achieving goals; (2) audiences or publics; (3) a desire to engage audiences, which involves listening and understanding the audience, and implies more than linear communication; and, (4) the view that strategic communication is a process. The definitions differ in that the DSB description explicitly seeks to engage in dialogue with publics, and acknowledges the importance of developing relationships with audiences. The DoD should include the notion of relationship building and management in its definition of strategic communication.

Although the concept of dialogue is not part of the DoD's definition of strategic communication, it is one its nine "Principles of Strategic Communication." Dialogue is defined as the "multi-faceted exchange of ideas to promote understanding and build relationships."<sup>30</sup> Effective communication requires dialogue, which involves active listening, engagement, and mutual understanding. Trust is engendered through dialogue, leading to the cultivation of relationships over time.<sup>31</sup> The principles fall short, however, by failing to recognize that a win-win by both the organization and its publics is desirable.

Though its "Principles of Strategic Communication" are generally sound, the DoD fails to place importance on a relational approach to strategic communication. It should include the idea of relationship building as a separate principle and acknowledge the

concept as key to achieving organizational goals. While dialogue is an integral element of relationship building, it is a means and not an end.

The DoD through its nine principles also promotes a message influence approach to strategic communication that focuses on benefitting the United States instead of mutually beneficial outcomes. The principle *responsive* is meant to ensure the "right audience, right message, right time, and right place."<sup>32</sup> For the DoD, the message and advancing its goals are paramount. "Communication strategy must reach intended audiences through [a] customized message that is relevant to those audiences."<sup>33</sup>

The DSB definition is the broadest and most inclusive of the three strategic communication definitions presented above because it recognizes the process and relational nature of communication. This dovetails with the relational theory of communication. The DSB definition provides the genesis of a useful and meaningful perspective on which to support the theory-based practice of strategic communication because of its focus on mutual understanding, dialogue, and relationship building.

Countless studies and reports over the past few years have reiterated the difficulty of finding a comprehensive definition upon which everyone can agree, and have advanced various recommendations on how to more effectively conduct strategic communication. Despite the plethora of reports and recommendations, not one called for theory to guide strategic communication practice. This is unfortunate, especially given the fact that the United States has been less than successful in gaining the support of the Afghan population during the last decade.

## The Need for Relationship Building

The Army's counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine advances the notion that foreign populations in countries where military operations occur are crucial to the mission's success. "If the local population is against the presence of foreign actors, structural long-term changes in the country, which are often the objective of crisis management operations, cannot be realized."<sup>34</sup>

In Afghan culture, personal ties are the foundation of social, political and economic life. Evidence shows that Coalition forces operating in Afghanistan recognize the importance of creating relationships with the indigenous populations to build trust and support for Coalition efforts at the grassroots level.

In Afghanistan, senior U.S. military leaders participate in Key Leader Engagements, NATO troops participate in shuras, and members of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) conduct regular meetings to create and sustain long-term relationships with local community and religious leaders. These forums permit respectful debate and discussion, help dispel rumors, and identify common interests and shared goals. Strategically, the engagements can create a win-win for both the organization and the public, and foster support for Coalition efforts and goals.

While interaction with civil society takes place, it is still too limited. Despite meetings with local citizens, NATO lacks language skills and has not created lasting bonds with Afghan civil society. This is a major weakness of NATO's communication efforts.<sup>35</sup> There is evidence that the participation and commitment of Afghan people is not always obtained. For example, the PRTs in Nangarhar and Laghman Provinces found Afghans there did not use U.S. government-funded development projects. Those Afghans living in non-violent provincial districts viewed the projects as foreign-provided

services because they were not given the opportunity to provide their input in the design and planning of the projects.<sup>36</sup> This indicates an area in which U.S. and Coalition forces should focus their relationship building efforts to ensure citizens' expectations and needs are met.

There is no evidence that strategic communication is used intentionally to foster mutually beneficial organization-public relationships, or that relationship building is even considered as a critical, strategic requirement. Of course, the United States has an active strategic communication program that uses the message influence model to promote its activities and garner support from the Afghan people. The question is whether the efforts of the leaders and military units are part of comprehensive a relationship management approach.

Public opinion polls also provide evidence that the United States is not achieving its objectives. A report released by ABC News and its media partners in December 2010 showed the limits of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. The poll revealed that Afghans were more negative in their assessment of the presence and performance of U.S. and NATO forces. Nationally, ratings of U.S. performance, confidence in its ability to provide security, and support for its presence all matched previous lows or set new ones in the poll.<sup>37</sup>

In a survey of public opinion by the International Republican Institute in November 2009, 69 percent of Afghans were satisfied with the development and reconstruction projects implemented by the international community. In contrast, 28 percent of the respondents were dissatisfied, citing a gap in reconstruction efforts and

local needs.<sup>38</sup> This perspective is especially disturbing after more than a decade of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

The Asia Foundation's 2010 survey of the Afghan people found that unemployment remains one of the most pressing issues in Afghanistan. More than two thirds (70 percent) of respondents said the availability of jobs in their local area is quite bad or very bad. Almost two thirds (65 percent) said the same about the supply of electricity.<sup>39</sup> These numbers indicate just two areas of concern among the Afghan populace that the United States could work to improve.

### Relational Communication Theory

Given the lack of comprehensive progress toward securing the support of the Afghan populace in the past decade, professional communicators need a theoretical framework beyond the message influence model on which to base effective strategic communication practice.

A survey of academic literature reveals an array of theories, models, concepts, and paradigms that together help describe the complex and multi-dimensional nature of human communication. This body of knowledge has come from numerous disciplines, including interpersonal communication, speech, linguistics, anthropology, clinical psychology, and the social sciences.

Theory can provide solutions for practical situations. Practical theories suggest new constructive ways of looking at situations. Old patterns are transformed and new understandings and actions are created that are more effective. Practical theories can identify the problems, techniques, and potential outcomes within a certain area of practice. Using practical theories, practitioners think about and gain insight into the problems and principles used by actual communicators in various situations. Practical

theories guide communicators to think through situations and select from a range of options. The communicator understands what is happening and can make strategic choices when faced with a problem.<sup>40</sup>

Moving beyond the simple linear message influence model and the transactional model, anthropologist Bateson developed the theory of relational communication. The relational communication body of knowledge is the most promising theory to advance the effective practice of strategic communication.

Bateson developed two seminal propositions that serve as the foundation for other relational theories. The first proposition is the dual nature of messages. Every communicative exchange has two messages, a *report* message and a *command* message. The report message contains the substance or content of the communication, while the command message describes the relationship. These two elements are also known as the content message and the relationship message.<sup>41</sup>

Bateson's second proposition is that relationships can be characterized by complementarity or symmetry. In a complementary relationship, if one participant is dominant, the other is submissive. In symmetry, dominance is met by dominance; submissiveness elicits submissiveness.<sup>42</sup>

Equally useful for understanding relational communication is the relational dialectics theory. Baxter and her colleagues explored "the complex ways in which persons-in-relationship use communication to manage the naturally opposing forces that impinge on their relationship at any given time." She viewed relationship as a dialogical and dialectical process. By describing relationship as both dialogical and

dialectical, Baxter meant that “the natural tensions of relationships are managed through coordinated talk.”<sup>43</sup>

Baxter characterized her theory as dialogic, meaning relationships are defined through dialogue. She viewed dialogue as “conversations that define and redefine relationships as they emerge in actual situations over time.”<sup>44</sup> She also referred to her theory as dialectical, meaning that contradictions are managed in relationships. For Baxter, “dialectic refers to a tension between opposing forces within a system. They are sites of struggle among meanings that arise in various and not-always consistent discourses.”<sup>45</sup>

The theories pioneered by Bateson and Baxter provide the starting point for a general public relations theory of relationship management useful for the practice of strategic communication. In a business context, “public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.”<sup>46 47</sup>

### Relationship Management

The quality of the relationships between an organization and its strategic publics will determine organizational success in the contemporary milieu. Dewey and Blumer, two classic theorists of public opinion, assumed that publics arise around issues or problems that affect them.<sup>48</sup> Publics begin as disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems. The behaviors of organizations can create problems that create publics.<sup>49</sup> Publics include those with whom the organization must establish and maintain enduring and mutually beneficial relationships.

Hon and J. Grunig pointed out that “an organization-public relationship begins when there are consequences created by an organization that affect publics, or when



the behaviors of publics have consequences on an organization."<sup>50</sup> Ledingham and Bruning defined organization-public relationships as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural, or political well being of the other." An ideal organization-public relationship, then, would be "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard."<sup>51</sup>

In 2003 Ledingham construed relationship management as a general theory of public relations, and suggested that relationship management involves "effectively managing organization-public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, [which] results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics."<sup>52</sup> The relationship management approach requires that practitioners develop initiatives centered on the notion of mutual benefit, thus maintaining balance between both organization and public interests.<sup>53</sup> Relationship management in public relations settings implies the development, maintenance, growth, and nurturing of mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its significant publics.<sup>54</sup>

Ledingham's theory of relationship management has three tenets. The first tenet suggests a linkage between organization-public relationships and outcomes such as improved satisfaction and levels of loyalty. The second tenet suggests that organizations and publics should identify common interests and goals and identify gaps which can be reduced. The third tenet requires public relations practitioners to propose ways organizations and publics can improve mutual benefit and understanding.<sup>55</sup>

Relationship building in the 21st century will be a strategic function directed by communication professionals. Key organizational senior leaders will engage in this function by building productive relationships that emphasize mutual support and cooperation.<sup>56</sup> Practitioners will develop and implement communication practices to help cultivate and maintain relationships with publics to achieve goals. Publics become the center of activity, directing the actions of organizations.

J. Grunig and Hunt believed that public relations served to manage communication between an organization and its publics,<sup>57</sup> while Ledingham and Bruning viewed public relations precisely as "relationship management."<sup>58</sup> Wilson stated the role of public relations "is to facilitate positive communication between an organization and its publics and that requires building relationships."<sup>59</sup>

In this context, public relations assists an organization adapt to a changing environment by providing information that identifies strategic publics, reports the concerns or expectations of these publics, and forecasts societal issues, and how publics will emerge around these issues. Public relations practitioners counsel top leaders on the consequences of organizational strategies, policies, and behavior on key publics. Public relations counselors should advise organizational leaders by addressing issues and by showing how to align organizational goals and behaviors to public values and norms, in ways that serve both the organizational and public interests. By building mutually beneficial relationships, "an organization obtains legitimacy, garners trust, and builds a good reputation."<sup>60</sup>

Ledingham and Bruning suggested that the key elements of an organization-public relationship were reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness,

mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding. They recommended that researchers and practitioners use these concepts when measuring the quality of strategic relationships.<sup>61</sup> Hutton suggested that relationships consist of some combination of trust, commitment, communication, the costs to exit the relationship and shared values.<sup>62</sup> Scholars found that publics expect organization-public exchanges to be mutually beneficial. Publics also expected that mutuality to extend for the life of the relationship.<sup>63</sup>

In the relationship management perspective, measuring public relations outcomes are based on the quality of mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its strategic publics. Program success is based on assessing the changes in attitude, evaluation, and/or behavior.<sup>64</sup> Practitioners evaluate communication activities by measuring their effects and correlating them with the attributes of a good relationship.<sup>65</sup> The quality of a relationship is a better predictor of long-term strategic outcomes.

Measuring relationship outcomes marks a movement away from traditional impact measures such as the quantity of press releases produced or number of stories placed in the press. Media placements are the immediate results of a particular public relations program, and are measures of short-term, tactical outputs. Gauging relationship quality also goes beyond outtake measures which judge whether or not the target audience received the message, and the degree of retention, comprehension, and awareness.<sup>66</sup>

Looking at costs is another method of assessing relationship quality. Through the relationship-building efforts of public relations, “the organization saves big money by

reducing the costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, or pressure campaigns that result from bad relationships with publics – especially activist groups.”<sup>67</sup>

*The Communication Linkage.* The reviewed literature supports the idea that relationships – not communication – are the appropriate domain of public relations, and that communication by itself cannot sustain long-term relationships or achieve strategic outcomes. Communication serves as a tool to help an organization begin, nurture, and maintain relationships with its publics. “The value of communication rests on its contribution to the quality of the organization-public relationship.”<sup>68</sup> Relationship management uses communication strategically.<sup>69</sup>

Communication bridges the relational gap. Communication should help deal with the consequences from the interactions between an organization and its publics. “The outcome of communication is not the end of the relationship; rather, it should lead the relationship to another level.”<sup>70</sup>

Public relations practitioners help develop strong relationships with an organization's publics that can endure adversity and competing interests through dialogic communication.<sup>71</sup> As Baxter noted in her relational dialogic and dialectic theory, relationships are created by the participants in conversation. Relationships do not happen by themselves. They are created, nurtured, and maintained through communication.<sup>72</sup>

Kent and Taylor argued that organizations should engage in a dialogic approach when practicing public relations because such an approach can “change the nature of the organization-public relationships by placing emphasis on the relationship.”<sup>73</sup> Engaging in a dialogic approach requires organizations to actively solicit information

from key publics and listen to, process, and respond to those messages. As the dialogue progresses, public relations practitioners are better able to identify common interests and shared goals. When used ethically, a dialogic approach can build relationships that serve both organizational and public interests.<sup>74</sup>

The dialogic approach views publics as active and equal participants in a dialogue with the organization. An organization focuses on the nature of the relationships it has or should have with its publics rather than on the publics themselves.<sup>75</sup>

According to J. Grunig, communication is essential to the practice of public relations excellence. Excellence is based on two-way symmetrical communication, centered on dialogue – the give-and-take between two parties. Thus, a relationship is built on interactive communication between the organization and its publics. Both parties are involved in sharing ideas and shaping the nature of the relationship. Communication helps the organization understand and also negotiate expectations with its publics. The organization's success depends on how well it satisfies the demands of its publics.<sup>76</sup>

Publics can use communication to persuade the organization to accept the public's position. If persuasion occurs in the two-way symmetric model, the public is just as likely to persuade the organization to change attitudes or behaviors as the organization is likely to change the public's attitudes or behaviors. Ideally, both management and publics will change somewhat after a public relations effort.<sup>77</sup>

Bruning and Lamb claimed that organizations should communicate both content and relational messages when interacting. Most organizations focus only on

communicating content messages and often fail to attend to the relational aspects of organization-public communication.<sup>78</sup> This is based on one of the propositions of Bateson's relational theory of communication discussed earlier.

According to Tufte, “Successful communication articulates trust, promotes feelings of security and belonging, and leads to reflection and action.” Communication for sustained change invests as much effort in ensuring the audience is capable of engaging with the messenger and is strong and resilient enough to enact change. “This is the most likely way in which target populations will re-evaluate loyalties and behavior.”<sup>79</sup>

The lesson for strategic communications professionals operating at home, in Afghanistan, or in other theaters around the world is that a participatory, relational communication approach works best. Developing a dialogue with the local population and providing a range of information to help people make meaning from messages and free choices, rather than telling them what to do in a message influence approach, is the right method. The conversations will help create, develop, and maintain the relationships between the Coalition and the people over the long term.

### Recommendations

The relational theory and the relationship management approach have gained scholarly and practical interest in the past decade. They offer promise for communication professionals conducting activities to support organizational goals.

To firmly embed theory in strategic communication practice, a number of recommendations are offered. First, use relational theory as the foundation for more effective strategic communication practice. Second, replace the message influence model with the relationship management approach that focuses on the quality of

mutually beneficial relationships organizations develop and maintain with strategic publics. The relationship – not the message – determines the meaning that a person makes from the communication.

Third, redefine the strategic communication process built on the Department of Defense's "Principles of Strategic Communication." The U.S. government must initiate and sustain mutually beneficial relationships with its strategic audiences. Through respectful dialogue, publics create accurate meaning from messages. The resulting understanding allows both an organization and its publics to achieve their goals. Both the organization and publics influence the other, and communication activities link the parties. Measuring success depends on the quality of the relationship, not on counting media clips. The Defense Department should judge relationship quality by using the elements of an organization-public relationship – reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding – advanced by Ledingham and Bruning.

Finally, articulate a new definition of strategic communication that focuses on the process of relationship building through dialogue, where both the organization and its strategic publics can influence each other and achieve mutually beneficial goals. The emphasis is on creating a space for dialogue and debate, permitting the audience to make meaning from messages.

### Conclusion

This paper proposes an alternative to the way strategic communication is currently conducted by the U.S. government. Ten years is enough time to prove that the message influence model does not work. It is time to apply relational theory to strategic communication practice. Through dialogue and relationship building the U.S.

government can better understand its strategic publics, build trust, and achieve goals that benefit all parties.

Building solid, win-win relationships with strategic publics by genuinely listening to concerns through dialogue, incorporating opinions and desires into the decision making process, and safeguarding public interests is not just a one-time, tactical assignment. Research has shown that relationship cultivation and building is a long-term, strategic process.<sup>80</sup>

When relationships with publics are treated as ends rather than means, remarkable things happen. Effectively managed long-term relationships benefit both for the organization and publics. The implications and applications to the relational management perspective are limited only by the imagination of communication practitioners, researchers, educators, and theorists.

Relationship management will only evolve through an awareness and understanding of this public relations paradigm and its diverse theoretical foundations. The over-used message influence model is far from sufficient to explain and predict the intricacies of strategic communication as it increasingly moves toward a central focus on relationships within the organization-public context.

Strategic communication will only advance when practitioners and senior leaders embrace relational theory and the relationship management approach. Creating mutually beneficial organization-public relationships allows all parties to achieve their goals. Relationship quality is a more powerful measure of program success than counting press releases. Putting strategic publics in the center parallels COIN doctrine,



and helps build popular consent and support. The U.S. government needs to shift to relationship management while there is still time to gain Afghan citizens' support.

## Endnotes

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<sup>43</sup> Littlejohn and Foss, *Theories of Human Communication*, 10th ed., 245.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>47</sup> Within the Department of Defense, the term *public affairs* rather than *public relations* is used because of the legal restrictions imposed by the 1913 Gillett Amendment. This amendment prohibits the expenditure of federal funds for publicity to promote an agency to members of Congress with the intent to influence or to engage in propaganda. Public affairs practitioners typically conduct similar functions to their public relations counterparts in the business world. Within the military environment, public affairs specialists handle media relations, internal communication and community relations. Information operations integrates information-related capabilities during military operations to influence or corrupt an adversary's decision making, protecting our own. Public affairs and information operations are integrated functions under the strategic communication umbrella. These functions can help create, develop and maintain meaningful organization-public relationships, just as the integration of public relations, marketing, and advertising achieve similar outcomes in the private sector of the communication profession.

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<sup>72</sup> Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 10th ed., 255.

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